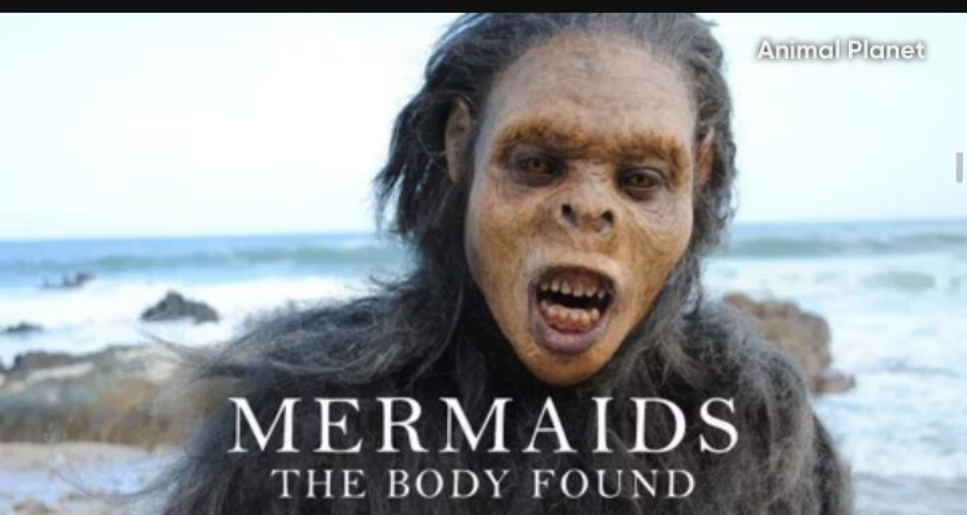


Mermaids: The Cringiest Nature Documentary Ever Made

Quackery aside, the Mermaid documentary series is perhaps most disturbing for what it tells us about how and why we consume “documentaries.”

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Can a nature documentary be dangerous to society? Sure, but not nearly as destructive as it is to a TV network’s long-term credibility. Promoting the fringe cryptozoological concept known as the Aquatic Ape Theory, ***Mermaids: The Body Found*** immediately made an impact on American society in 2011. Airing on the U.S.-based Animal Planet and Discovery Channel, it put forth the bold assertion that mermaids were possibly real and that the US government was covering it all up.

Call it what you may — pseudo-intellectual tripe, academic junk food, or outright bullsh*t — no one can argue that *Mermaids* pulled off the impossible, drawing millions of viewers to watch a nature doc. No small feat then or now. Along with a follow-up that is equally worthless, *Mermaids: The New Evidence*, *Mermaids: The Body Found* is the sort of TV production to set back science education decades. With a single misguided special, the TV network was wading (pardon the pun) into P.T. Barnum-territory.

The sequel proved it was no fluke, the highest0rated show in the history of Animal Planet at that time (per ABC News). It says a lot about the level of respect TV executives have for their audiences, and where their true motives lie. Quackery aside, the Mermaid documentary series is perhaps most disturbing for what it tells us about how and why we consume “documentaries.”

Exploiting Our Innate Curiosity



Discovery's press department (the parent company of Animal Planet) gushed that "spectacular CGI animates a world where mermaids really do swim below the water's surface, cooperatively hunt with dolphins." The "spectacular CGI" quote refutes itself (ten seconds, and you know this ain't *Avatar*), but it's the ridiculous speculation that dolphins are chilling out with mermaids as they hunt for mackerel that tells you everything you need to know about the documentary's thesis. This was selling a fairy-tale view of reality to viewers who trusted the network, but were instead fed a two-hour-long clickbait video with commercial breaks.

Mermaids: The Body Found follows in a long, hackneyed route of selling a lobotomized understanding of science to the most impressionable, the documentary cleverly edited, intermingled with expert testimony, and professionally narrated by a familiar voice to lend it the appearance of a David Attenborough presentation. Long the butt of marine biologists' jokes and hucksters' get-rich-quick schemes, the deceptive documentary proved that mermaids were no longer only found in the wildest dreams of lonely sailors, but also those of Animal Planet board members.

Bad Faith, Bad Science



This was always meant to be entertainment, not science. Originally aired with little more than a two-second-long disclaimer at the very end of the "documentary" that many didn't see or fully understand, *Mermaids* inflated its case with eyewitness testimonies of scientists and raw footage of the aquatic cryptids. None of it was based in empirical, verifiable evidence. The interviews with experts were fabricated in an obvious attempt to con viewers, which likely included many children who grew to adulthood thinking that Ariel was real, singing to crabs.

There's a right way to question scientific consensus and a wrong way, and Animal Planet chose the most vapid, sensationalist path possible. The bitter irony is, that the backlash to this documentary only discouraged real biologists from seriously trying to study cryptids, and hampered any real possible efforts to secure grant money or tenure for any scholars who did dare conduct cryptozoological research in the ensuing controversy. Literally nothing good came out of this incident.

The U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration was unequivocal in their claim: "No evidence of aquatic humanoids has ever been found" (via Reuters) The story gets stupider. The brains behind the cynical nature documentary was Charlie Foley, Senior Vice President of Development at Animal Planet. He sought a worthy special to piggyback on the success of the network's most successful program to date: a documentary about dragons. Whether Foley honestly believed mermaids were real, or simply authorized the fake doc purely out of financial motivations, remains unclear. But it happened, and that's the problem. Carl Sagan is rolling in his grave.

The End of an Era



The ramifications of this particular incident were marginal, but only because the state of TV documentaries was already so thoroughly eroded by charlatans. It's inevitable that documentaries miss the mark, but the *Mermaid* debacle marked the demise of the Discovery Channel (and by extension, other formerly scholarly networks like the History Channel and The Learning Channel) as reputable sources of educational programming.

Niche basic cable channels once boldly documented obscure moments of history, science, and medicine, broadcasting footage of surgeries and legit documentaries like the *Engineering an Empire*, presented by Peter Weller (aka, the guy from the only two good *Robocop* movies). By 2011, these same bastions of gloriously geeky educational TV shows were morally bankrupt, trying to convince us that reptilian aliens are sneaking into our bedrooms and tinkering with our DNA as we sleep. The transition noteworthy as much for the collective apathy everyone experienced as for the memes the trend created, pseudoscience making minor celebrities of *Ancient Aliens*'s rogues gallery of fake historians. Not even Robocop could save us from this travesty.

A decade later in the United States, this insult to science is still being regularly broadcast, duping a whole new generation who want to believe the scientists they see in documentaries are telling the truth. Whose fault is it really? And we wonder why nobody trusts the media or scientists anymore.